Beecher on Ely, 'Russian Populism: A History'

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In the study of Russian populism one large bone of contention is the question of definition. In Franco Venturi’s classic *Roots of Revolution*, the history of Russian populism was identical with the early history of the Russian revolutionary movement. Its roots went back to the reign of Nicholas I and the writings of Alexander Herzen, and it came to an end in March 1881 after the assassination of Alexander II. Populism for Venturi was an agrarian socialist ideology whose devotees argued that Russia could bypass the capitalist stage of development and proceed through the peasant commune directly to the establishment of socialism.[1] For Richard Wortman Russian populism was not an ideological movement and many populists were not revolutionaries. What united them was a mentality—a sympathy for the Russian peasantry that became the basis of their hopes for the future.[2] Others approached the history of Russian populism with an eye to its relation with Marxism. Thus Andrzej Walicki argued that populism was “a theoretical construct created by the Russian Marxists” which was only later accepted by the populists themselves.[3]

Christopher Ely’s concept of Russian populism is broad, leaving room for “all those members of the intelligentsia fascinated by the narod (people), from conservative Slavophiles to radical socialists” (p. ix). For Ely the term “populism” refers to a “worldview espoused by members of educated society (obshchestvo) that encapsulates respect for and devotion to the narod” (p. 3). He adds that “that devotion included a variety of hopes and expectations for the positive impact the narod would exert on Russia’s future development.” Thus populism for Ely was less a consistent set of principles than “a general pattern of hopes and ideas that characterized the interests and anxieties of much of late-Imperial Russian educated society.”

Ely’s approach is roughly chronological, and he gives particular attention to the roots of populist thought prior to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The roots, he argues, can be found in the crisis of identity experienced by the members of educated society during the first half of the nineteenth century. Peter Chaadaev’s fierce attack on the rootlessness of educated Russians and the imitative character of their culture in his “Philosophical Letter” of 1836 is presented as a dramatic expression of this crisis of identity. But the most impressive feature of Ely’s discussion of the roots of Russian populism is his meticulous analysis of the influence of the Slavophiles. If, as Chaadaev believed, educated Russians were homeless imitators lacking inherited traditions, the Slavophiles insisted that the cause was their abandonment of their own native traditions. Ely goes on to argue that the Slavophiles originated many ideas essential to mature populism, including the exaltation of peasant
culture and the celebration of the village commune (p. 28). Ely works out the argument with care, noting anomalies and exaggerations in the Slavophile position and offering a superb unpacking of the crucial concept of sobornost’ or spiritual unity (pp. 30-31).

In the discussion of the ideological foundations of Russian populism, Alexander Herzen necessarily plays a central role; and Ely gives pride of place to Herzen’s view of the village commune as a harbinger of Russia’s socialist future. “Herzen’s ‘Russian socialism,’” he writes, “established the original set of assumptions and aspirations on which the populist movement was based” (p. 41). Carefully tracing the evolution of Herzen’s thought, Ely argues that through Herzen the Slavophile admiration for peasant communalism was transformed into a vision of a whole society organized around uniquely Russian communal institutions.

A difficult task confronting historians of Russian populism is to maintain a balance between two stories: the story of the rise of populist thought, and the story of the spasmodic and often unsuccessful efforts of the populists to act on their beliefs. Ely tells the two stories separately in two different chapters. But he never loses sight of the connection between the two. Nor does he give way to the temptation to simplify the course of events and the development of ideas. His discussion of “populism in theory” shows a sensitivity to the complexity of the subject that is absent in most standard accounts. He does not reduce populist thought to a collection of points or beliefs. Indeed, a real quality of Ely’s approach is that he is able to write about populist theory in a non-reductive way, recognizing its variegated nature and its contradictions. “Even at the peak of its influence,” he writes, “populism took shape more as an endless, ongoing debate than as a coherent doctrine. It existed almost exclusively in the realm of the intelligentsia imagination, and that imagination was a hothouse in which ideas grew quickly into a tangle of overlapping and intertwining theories, plans, and practical goals” (p. 74).

One theme that emerges clearly from this book is that, throughout its history, “populism was a movement of deep and determined self-abnegation” (p. 86). The populists looked to the Russian peasantry, the narod, as a source of wisdom from which the intelligentsia had much to learn. Placing great hope in what they saw as the communal consciousness of the Russian peasantry, many of them believed that this required them to reject their own cultural background and to look to the narod for the knowledge necessary to support a future national community. At the same time they saw a role for themselves: they believed that their own intervention was necessary to awaken the communal consciousness of the peasantry and to steer the village commune toward socialism on a national level. Thus Ely can write that “by wedding peasant communalism and intelligentsia support into a united effort to build socialism,” the theorist Peter Lavrov “injected new life into the disconnected populist views that had come before him” (p. 75).

The high point of populist activism came in the summer of 1874 when thousands of young people descended on the countryside in an effort to learn from the people by living with them as teachers, laborers, and nurses. The well-known story of the “going to the people” movement is vividly narrated by Ely, whose account of the complex motives of the participants goes deeper than that of the standard narratives. Ely notes that populists continued to “go to the people” after 1874. But the final outcome of the high hopes that the movement first inspired was a powerful sense of disillusionment: “The movement did not lead to saving the narod, or to merging with them, or to raising their political consciousness. What it did lead to was a change in tactics” (p. 111).
The populists had already begun to go underground and to engage in conspiratorial activities in the 1860s. But after the failure of the going-to-the-people movement, they began to focus on the creation of a network of underground organizations and the development of new forms of activism including agitation among artisans urban workers, the organization of protest demonstrations, and finally, the initiation of a campaign of terror in which “deliberate acts of violence for political purposes” became “the new method of political struggle” (p. 118). This campaign of terror, which led to a split in the movement and the emergence of the terrorist faction, Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), was to culminate in 1881 with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

In a fascinating section Ely confronts head-on the key question raised by the turn to political assassination and the pursuit of the tsar. How could the populists believe that the assassination of the tsar would lead to revolution in the countryside? After exploring a range of answers, none of them adequate, Ely argues that they were taken in by the notoriety, and even panic, produced by their initial efforts at underground activism and mistakenly believed that they had become a powerful revolutionary force. What they did accomplish was to play a major role in the creation of political terrorism as we know it today. In the process, however, their own movement was transformed as they became less preoccupied with the peasantry and more focused on urban revolution (pp. 119-125).

Most surveys of the history of Russian populism conclude with the repression that followed the assassination of Alexander II. But at this point in Ely’s study three of eight chapters remain. Observing that “the rise of socialist populism was in fact part of a larger and more complicated story” (p. 127), Ely goes on to offer an original exploration of populist themes in late nineteenth-century literature, art, and music; an analysis of the regrets and reorientations of many populists after the collapse of their hopes concerning an idealized peasantry; and a detailed account of the rise in the twentieth century of a new, revitalized “neo-populism” in the form of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

Ely’s central point concerning the emergence of populism in Russian literature and the arts is that many of Russia’s greatest writers and artists attempted “to locate within the narod some feature capable of redeeming and reconstituting the whole of Russian society” (p. 132). He argues that despite the obvious difference between Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Orthodox nationalism and the socialism of the populists, Dostoevsky shared with the populists “the idea that the narod carried within itself the makings of a revolutionary transformation that would enable Russia to point the way forward to a Europe that had lost its way as a result of capitalist modernity” (p. 137). Leo Tolstoy also looked to the peasantry for models, but for models of individual rather than collective salvation. In War and Peace (1869) Platon Karataev is remembered by Pierre Bezukhov as an idealization “of all that was Russian.” For Bezukhov, Ely observes, Karataev possesses “a kind of wisdom that has been trained out of the elite” (p. 144). Ultimately, Tolstoy himself concluded that the educated classes were living meaningless lives, and during the last three decades of his life Tolstoy tried valiantly, if not always successfully, to take up a simple Christian life modeled on his image of the narod.

In a second concluding chapter, “Regrets and Revisions,” Ely explores the varied responses of the populists to the discovery that their hopes for the peasantry and the village commune were misplaced. The most ambitious attempt to get beyond the superficial idealization of the commune was the publication by Alexander Engelgardt, starting in 1872, of a series of annual letters reporting on the world of the Russian peasants. Ely also discusses the work of the novelists Gleb Uspensky and

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Nikolai Zlatovratsky, who sought to understand who the “real” peasants were and to convey that understanding to urban readers. But their efforts, like those of Engelgardt, which also included an attempt to train a new generation of “educated peasants” through the creation of a model commune, ended in disappointment. Finally, in a twentieth-century coda to his book, Ely offers an account of the rise and fall of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, considered as a new form of populism developed “under the influence of, and in direct competition with, Marxism” (p. 188).

Taken as a whole, this book has two features unusual in a work introduced as “a survey for the use of students and those unfamiliar with the history of Imperial Russia” (p. viii). First, it is original. If it builds on the work of Wortman and Walicki, it is still the first attempt known to me to write a cultural history of Russian populism—the first attempt to consider the great Russian writers and artists as part of the history, which also includes the going-to-the-people movement and Narodnaya Volya. The second striking feature of this book is its sensitivity to the complexity of the subject. Simplification is the common coin of textbook writing, and the history of Russian populism is a topic that would seem to require simplification at numerous points. But somehow Ely has managed to produce a history of Russian populism that conveys a sense of the difficulties of the topic—the complexity of motives and arguments and the narrative twists and turns—and still remains clear and compelling. This is a most impressive book.


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